

VIDEO ART



Ed Emshwiller: Combining Inner and Outer Landscapes

Ed Emshwiller deserves the title of Dean of Video Artists. His important video experiments, produced mostly during his eight-year residency at the Television Laboratory of WNET/Thirteen, New York, have inspired younger video artists. At the invitation of Lori Zippay of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), Emshwiller's videotape distributor, I recently reviewed his prodigious output during a two-day screening. Names like Skip Sweeney, John Sanborn, Mitchell Kriegman, Doris Chase, Bill Viola and Kit Fitzgerald, among others, came to mind. That Emshwiller has attempted and realized so many ideas, methods and techniques while hardly ever repeating himself is quite an historical achievement. Perhaps his work is so enduring

because he is interested in creating total compositions rather than individual effects.

In a videotaped artist's statement produced by EAI, Emshwiller says in part: "In a curious way, when I became involved in video, it was a way of returning to painting. . . . I've always been interested in combining, transforming images. With video, I can readily combine the inner world, the fantasy world, the subjective world, with the external world. To me, that inner landscape is as important as the external landscape. One of the beauties of video is that it is probably the most immediate and most effective documenting medium for capturing reality. But, simultaneously, it has a great capacity for dealing with fan-

tasy and combining real images in unreal ways."

It was informative for me to re-view the Emshwiller tapes after a talk with him in New York last January:

Scape-Mates, nominated for a 1972-73 New York Emmy Award, is a half-hour color work using two dancers in a computer-generated environment. Beginning with black-and-white art work, Emshwiller created the basic shapes and movements electronically, achieving the illusion of depth. Later, the dancers were choreographed and chromakeyed into the ever-changing environment. A Paik-Abe video synthesizer added the background and color, while multiple generations of imagery created the desired textual qualities.

Emshwiller composed the soundtrack using tape recorders and a Moog audio synthesizer. To avoid curdling, the layering of reality with fantasy requires special mixing skills. Ed proved to be a master at combining his "inner and outer landscapes." *Scape-Mates* was produced with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), plus encouragement from David Loxton, the TV Lab's director, and with computer animation by Dolphin Productions of Computer Image Corp.

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ily of artists in their own environment." While Ed's other videotapes used 2-inch tape, *Family Focus* was deliberately shot on black-and-white 1/2-inch and intermixed with 16mm family film footage, slides, photographs and computer-animated art processed to produce a personal and sometimes poetic inventory of family events and feelings.

The script was written and narrated by Carol Emshwiller. According to Ed, "All the members of the family were to have participated in the editing process. The tapes were to have been a source of feedback for the family who will mold the final product according to their own responses." Unfortunately, there were too many cooks creating the self-indulgent concoction. Despite the usual Emshwiller video virtuosity, the viewer is torn between loyalty to the maker and his family and the lack of the interest in the mixture of corny clichés, mawkish chatter and pompous pronouncements. As a record for the Emshwillers, their family and friends, it's fine, but the work lacks the universal appeal found in other Emshwiller works. This time, video verité and video manipulations helped to drown what may have been an interesting collection of family movies and snapshots. This contrasts with Skip Sweeney's spectacularly inventive use of family pictures in his videotape *My Father*

Emshwiller finds creating video installations challenging and satisfying. Dealing with architectural and psychological space is of great interest to him.

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After experimenting with dramatic narrative, Emshwiller produced *Sur Faces* in 1977, an hour-long color videotape in which eight performers act out encounters between men and women expressed in different styles from Strindberg to Shakespeare to William Hanle. To the benefit of TV viewers, Emshwiller used the TV Lab's new computerized editing system and other hardware, using real, abstracted, synthesized and layered imagery to transform action from stage space to video space. Good, creative sound added to the narrative-musical structure and lent an implied poetry to the work. The piece was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and NYSCA and produced at the TV Lab: David Loxton,

director; John Godfrey, videotape editor; Bill Marpet, technical assistant.

Dubs was produced in 1978 using special editing techniques to create the celebrated Emshwiller visual choreography. Like a witches' brew, two mask-like heads float in and out, around and about, finally revealing a man and a woman who go through a series of transformations and disappearances only to return to some form of connectedness. This tape is the quintessential Emshwiller experiment in electronic transformations in time and space, composing sound and images to create new forms of rhythmic video poetry. Using the CMX editing system, he organizes the actors' movements electronically as they go through their male-female interactions. Again, as in other Emshwiller works, I feel segments of *Dubs* can be enjoyed without disturbing the organic whole. Peter Emshwiller and Carla Jason support the work, engineer John Godfrey is videotape editor. The work was produced with a grant from NYSCA and produced at WNET's TV Lab with special thanks to Carol Brandenburg.

In September 1978, Emshwiller was interviewed on the *Dick Cavett Show* on PBS. In addition to showing excerpts of his work and regaling audiences with examples of his video manipulations, Ed gave a definition of video art: "The use of



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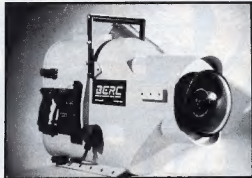
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the medium, more like a painter or a conceptualist would, than say, a dramatist—not that there isn't an overlap. When Cavett asked whether there were different schools of video art, Ed answered, "Yes, the primary difference is when video is created primarily for exhibition in an art gallery and when it is a program which can be shown on TV. But it's not an either/or thing. A lot of video is reflective, meditative, dealing with forms of perception and an awareness of space and time."

Sunshine is a three-minute digital computer-animated color videotape made by Emswiler in 1979 using a paint program written by Dr. Alvy Ray Smith, with Lance Williams and Garland Stern at the New York Institute of Technology. I asked Emswiler to describe it: "It's a piece that involves transformations of action—a face—with systematic overtones and suggestions of birth, death and rebirth," he said. "I like to work with images having emotional impact. In this case, I wasn't trying to make a big drama, but I do want the piece to resonate with the mind within the soul of the viewer. I've selected aspects of this visage, taken it through various transformations so that in turn it is starting and humorous, implying meditating, destruction and radiance; then the transforming of the world of perspec-

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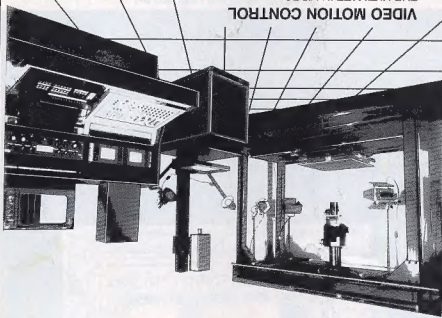
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live, of seeing it in a new way, being in a new space, then returning once again to the original—but transformed." Although the piece exudes the personality of the maker. A Guggenheim Foundation grant supported *Sunshine*. Although he has composed the soundtrack for nearly half of his films and tapes, Emswiler does not consider himself a musician. He studied violin as a child and had a swing band while in high school, but he never had any formal training in composition. He considers himself an artist who uses different tools himself an artist who uses different tools to express himself.

Emswiler finds creating video installations challenging and satisfying. Dealing with architectural and psychological spaces of great interest to him, a chance has done two installations to date. The first, *Slivers*, shown at "The Kitchen" in New York in 1977, was a multi-monitor piece, in which he masked the video-screens into varying-sized slivers, creating different ways of seeing the same images from his *Crossings and Meetings*. The second and more elaborate four-

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monitor installation with stereo sound, *Passes*, was shown in December of last year at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Emshwiller calls the piece, produced at Cal Arts, "a musical surround—five short pieces exploring aspects of time and space in video performance." One needed a revolving neck in order to follow the visual choreography displayed on the monitors placed on each of the gallery's four walls, but the beautiful sound, filling the space, was a delight to hear.

Here's how Emshwiller described each of the pieces in a gallery talk instituted by John Hanhardt, the museum's curator for film and video: "*Space Passes* consists of simultaneous showing, on separate monitors, of four unedited musical events taped in different locations. *Vascular Passes* shows closeup images of the body with internal sounds recorded through a sensitive medical microphone. *Cut Passes* is a music-dance performance restructured by video editing for multiple sonic and visual exchanges. *Pan Passes* consists of digital video image echoes, postproduction audio echoes, and asynchronous video-installation echoes orchestrated to transform sounds and images of a performance recorded with a fixed camera."

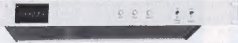
Thanks to Ed Emshwiller's four-week offer of encouragement and equipment use, Haji, Lee Breuer's "performance poem" acted by Mabou Mines' Ruth Maleczek, had its premiere at Cal Arts in March 1983 before coming to the Public Theatre in New York. Although a one-woman show, the array of video equipment with three camera operators, two monitor controllers, a lighting and sound technician, and a musician, all working with split-second timing, made it a multi-faceted extravaganza which will be seen again later this year.

Ed Emshwiller was born in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1925. He knew he was going to be an artist as far back as he could remember, an idea that was encouraged at home and in school. He recalls his mother saying he must have "art in his soul" as he took lessons at the Chicago Art Institute while he was in the second and third grade. When his family moved to Washington, D.C., Ed took Saturday art classes at the Corcoran Art Gallery.

After a three-year stint in the Army, he attended the University of Michigan, where he received a Bachelor of Design degree in 1949, then he went to Paris to study graphics at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. When he moved to New York in 1951, and until 1964, Emshwiller led what he called a schizophrenic life doing abstract expressionist oils for pleasure and science fiction illustrations in gouache to earn a living for himself and his growing family. While his formal work was abstract, his commercial work

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consisted of realistic illustrations sprinkled with imagination. This mix becomes evident in his later video work. Toward the end of the 1950s, Emshwiller joined Cinema 16 and began doing experimental films, using a movie camera to record the development of his paintings using time-lapse photography. He won a grand prize by double-exposing in the camera animated images of his abstract paintings with images of a young dancer. This led to a \$10,000 Ford Foundation grant, which seriously led him to making movies. In 1964, he gave up painting altogether and launched himself into a new career working in film. He worked as a cameraman, collaborated on projects, produced a number of low-budget films and worked on documentaries, including *Project Apollo*. He also produced a number of films for the Dance Theater of Alvin Nikolais.

Around 1971, Charles Levine, interviewed as a filmmaker, Emshwiller instead of simply being unwittingly opened the video door to viewing moviemakers on a cable show.

Around 1971, Charles Levine, interviewed as a filmmaker, Emshwiller instead of simply being unwittingly opened the video door to viewing moviemakers on a cable show.

Emshwiller, used films he had produced over the years, plus a Levine interview, plus live and delayed action, plus Carol Ed's wife, reading a bio of him—"all this going on over layers and layers, plus a lot of keying... a half-hour of terribly complex thing, technically," Ed recalls. Nevertheless, after some editing, the tape was later shown at the Whitney Museum by David Biesstock, then head of the film department.

While Emshwiller wasn't impressed with what videographers were turning out with their portapakas at the time, he did get hooked on video because of its "immediacy and its facility to combine and transform images." In 1972, when David Loxton was starting the Television Laboratory at WNET, New York, Emshwiller, among others, was invited to discuss possibilities of working in video. Emshwiller was shown some demo reels at Dolphin, and what he saw looked "jazzy" to him, but he was interested in computer work nonetheless. What Emshwiller recorded at Dolphin was second prize at the first national video festival in Minneapolis. The first effort led to *Scrap-Mates*, his first important video work.

Emshwiller is currently Provost and Dean of the School of Film and Video at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. His job is to supervise and make policy decisions and be the "court of last resort" when conflicts arise. Not all deans teach, but he does by choice. Asked if art can be taught, he replied: "What do we know that we haven't learned from others? We are taught by example—by their actions, their behavior—

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What are Emswiller's criteria for excellence, what I think we're talking about is, given the background we have, the comparisons we relate to this particular object or action, then we make an assessment. We say it's more or less effective. And those we deem more effective, we consider excellent."

Is Emswiller a populist or an elitist in art? "Though I enjoy the popular arts—I really enjoy a good, old-fashioned Hollywood movie—my allegiance is really to elitist fine arts. The reason for that,

What are Emswiller's criteria for excellence? "I think we all have judgments, he answered. "We are all critics. In a certain kind of metaphysical sense perhaps all things are equal, but in a practical sense, as in an organism, we are selective in order to survive. We're formally pass judgement on anything or not, we read it somehow. It's always on the basis of what our previous experience has been. So when we talk of

Ed believes there are a lot of people who derive satisfaction from being esoteric. "I've heard it said, and it has always struck me as a sort of a strange concept, that the more difficult, the more obscure, the idea, the more generally incomprehensible the intention, the better. That's not what art is about. Of course some people use language to sound more impressive than the ideas they are describing, but that's as old as humanity, and it doesn't apply just to art," he said.

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Two images from Emswiller's 1972 tape *Scape-Mate*.



frankly, is that I think it's where new ideas happen that are stimulating to me more often—among the people who are trying new forms. Not to say that they always succeed. God knows they don't, but I am interested in the opening up—being on that edge—that's what is most important to me. So if I had to choose sides, I would go with the elitists."

Regarding the future, Emshwiller claims that just the way the automobile replaced the horse, the computer is going to materially change our lives. "The process of distribution is going through a shakedown today. Technol-

ogy is turning the world over and causing unrest at the present time. Distribution of information and robots will play quite a role. As a result, we're going to have to restructure our whole society. When the automobile arrived, we developed ribbons of concrete everywhere. Today we're living in a Xerox world—once something is made, it becomes free as speech. As we talk and I coin a new phrase, my phrase becomes our phrase, and the minute you publish it in **Video-graphy**, it becomes the phrase of a great many people overnight. That's the way information goes today."

To Ed Emshwiller, making work is a challenge, an adventure, a quest, a series of discoveries, an excitement in trying to grow. "Although I've tried a lot of different things, we all have habits, ruts of thinking, so that we have a signature even when we try to be different. As we grow older we become more selective, and that makes it more difficult to create new forms. It's my intention to keep growing. If I don't, then I know I'm not fulfilling my self-image," he said.

Considering the layering possibilities inherent in video, I asked Emshwiller if he thought there was a limit as to how many audiovisual stimuli the brain can absorb and process. "There's definitely a limit," he said. "We make some sense out of whatever information we are given, but whether or not we're really receiving it, except in the grossest sense, is a question. Overload is our natural state. We filter out most things, and make sense of a few things. When we get a barrage of images and sounds, we may be confused more than we are normally. Of course, when we're confused, we feel lost, and get a real sense of overload," he added.

Emshwiller recalled that the very first piece he did on cable had portions that were a mess because no one could possibly have gotten all the information contained in it. "I know some people who deliberately go for what I call a simultaneous bombardment of too many sources at one time, a kind of cacophony of sound and image. During the '60s, when people were trying to stretch limits of perception through various art forms, two things were pretty clear: one kind of limit was stasis—no information, no movement, no change. The other was a bombardment where there was an overload. We're ultimately not comfortable with no movement and we're ultimately not comfortable with so much confusion that we can't find our bearings. Once you've experienced both extremes, you've had it. I wouldn't waste my time to do either," he said. "It's like painting white on white. Who needs to do that again? If you want to, fine, feel free, but it doesn't give me any new information, or a new sensation," he added.

Pioneer painter, film and video artist Ed Emshwiller has taught at Yale University, the University of California at Berkeley, Cornell University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and has given workshops at various media arts centers. He is a rare, sensitive, compassionate human being who happens to enjoy imagemaking. He expressed his philosophy of work in the following words: "The thing that never changes, no matter what medium I use, is the difficulty of conceiving and structuring a work that is meaningful to other human beings."

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